

International Journal of Education Sciences (IJES)

Received on 03/23. 06. 2014

REF. NO. IJES-484

(Always refer our Reference No. for all correspondence)

Assessing Students' Academic Writing at Tertiary Institutions: Implications for Teaching Writing

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KEYWORDS Coherence, cohesion contextualization, colloquialism, mother tongue, direct translation, competent-learners, not-so-competent learners.

ABSTRACT The main focus in this paper is to assess whether students that write in the second language are able to write coherent text. Cook (1989 :40) defines coherence as the quality of being meaningful and unified. For the purposes of this article students at a tertiary institution in South Africa were given an essay to write on *Challenges Facing Education in South Africa* and those essays were marked looking at coherence and cohesion Findings showed that the not so competent learners in academic writing. failed to contextualize the topic, their paragraphs and sentences were not linked. Their essays were disjointed, in the sense that what had gone before did not provide a smooth transition for what was coming next and a number of issues were discussed in one paragraph. Some of the reasons why learners could not write coherent text is because English is their second language, furthermore, there are no resources in their schools, their teachers are not well trained and the quality of education is poor in the rural schools where most of them come from.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing requires a conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas (Myles, 2002). For black learners who have to deal with writing in an unfamiliar language, this presents additional difficulty. Black learners at tertiary institutions in South Africa have to write in a second language (L2), and thus are also confronted with social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition. As they do not often consider the social contexts in which L2 academic writing takes place, models of first language (L1) writing instruction and research on composing processes are often found wanting in L2 writing pedagogy (Mc Laughlin 1987). Following Myles (2002), language proficiency and competence is the cornerstone of the ability to write in the L2. This is critical in South Africa considering the apartheid legacy and the deprived social conditions under which black learners often live and acquire their education.

The lack of academic writing proficiency means that black students often experience difficulties with their studies at tertiary institutions. In South Africa, there is no institution offering tertiary level education in an African language medium. Therefore, it could be argued that the medium of instruction often bars African students from obtaining a proper educational qualification (Van Zyl, 1994).

Therefore, this paper explores errors in context, cohesion and coherence in relation to L2 writing strategies used by black learners at a tertiary institution in South Africa. The paper focuses on errors of contextualization and coherence, with the aim of exploring the strategies used by black students to write coherent academic texts. I investigated the L2 writing process adopted by competent and non-competent black learners to produce coherent academic texts. This was done through a comparison of the writing processes adopted by the competent and the not-so-competent learners.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper aims at answering the following research questions.

- i) What writing processes do black students adopt with regard to English Second Language (ESL) academic writing?

- ii) Is there a differential effect in academic writing skills between those students who attended rural or township Department of Education and Training (DET) schools and those who attended white (Model C) schools?

Coherence

This paper assesses coherence and cohesion of students' academic writing. Cook (1989: 40) defines coherence as the 'quality of being meaningful and unified'. Halliday & Hassan (1989: 48), give a more comprehensive explanation of coherence, when they say, a text is characterized by coherence when it hangs together. At any point after the beginning, what has gone before provides the environment for what is coming next. This sets up internal expectations, which are matched up with the reader's own expectations. The latter's expectations are sourced from the external context of situation and culture.

On the other hand, Ross and Murray (1975:82), define coherence as the link between sentences, between paragraphs and a logical connection. Therefore, coherence is the product of two factors: paragraph unity and sentence cohesion. It is also the use of transitional devices, for example, 'yet' introducing a contrasting statement and 'therefore' setting up a conclusion of the train of thought. These devices and many more help to link ideas within a paragraph (Kies, 2004).

Another way of tying sentences and paragraphs together involves using reference words that point to an idea mentioned previously. Words like; 'this', 'these', 'such' and 'that' can be used to tie one sentence to the other. These reference words should not be used by themselves, but should be combined with the important words and phrases from previous sentences or paragraphs. In order to achieve paragraph unity, the learner must ensure that the paragraph has a single generalization that serves as the focus of attention, that is, a topic sentence. He/she must also ensure that other sentences in a paragraph maintain the same focus of attention, as the topic sentence (Winterwood and Murnay, 1975: 88-94).

Banda (2003) argues that the ability to write a text that is error free is not a naturally acquired skill but is formally learned or culturally transmitted as an asset of practices in formal instructional settings. Students can only learn the skill in a school situation. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. Writing involves composing, conducting research, developing ideas, analyzing ideas, writing the first draft, editing and writing the final draft

(Omaggio, 1993). It is the act of composing which creates problems for those writing in L2 in academic contexts.

To use language effectively, the learner must ensure that the language holds together into a coherent, intelligible whole. In a paragraph, every sentence and every phrase contribute to the meaning of the whole piece. A coherent paragraph does more than simply lay down facts, it organizes them, thus creating a logical argument that makes sense from one idea to another. The unity and relatedness of a text is in part a result of a recognizable pattern for the propositions and ideas in the passage, but it is also a function of the grammatical devices that strengthen the global unity and create local connectedness (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain 2000:8). This is where cohesion, in particular, the grammatical devices of reference come in.

Cohesive devices are linguistic resources that language has for linking one part of a text to another (Halliday & Hassan 1989). Although the overall coherence of a longer text depends on the presence of a conventional scheme or organization that is recognized as generic or specific to a particular communicative purpose and discourse community, the overall coherence of such a text also depends on the degree of coherence within each paragraph or section of a passage (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain 2000:8). Each sentence or utterance should be related both to the previous and following sentences in such a manner that the reader finds it easy to effectively interpret the text.

One can improve coherence by referring to nouns in a previous sentence, thus emphasizing the connection in thought from one sentence to the next avoiding unnecessary repetition. In addition, repetition can be used to link ideas within a paragraph. This can be used to emphasize an important point (Ross and Murray, 1975: 88-94). Using the synonyms can create sentence cohesion, since synonyms actually share several elements of meaning. Using a pronoun to make explicit reference back to a form mentioned earlier is another way of creating cohesion. Pronouns are used to avoid repetition of the word, as mentioned earlier. Use of overt markers (for example 'first; 'finally') of sequence to highlight the connection between ideas creates cohesion in a sentence. This system can link ideas that are otherwise completely unconnected.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher conducted the present study within primarily qualitative approach. This is because the qualitative approach brings together a combination of methods. It also uses the naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context. Qualitative research is any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 17).

For the purposes of this paper an essay was given to two groups of learners who were first year students at a tertiary institution. The essay topic was ‘Challenges Facing Education in South Africa’. The groups were composed of 10 learners who were competent in academic writing and 10 learners who were not-so-competent in academic writing. Their competency was measured on the basis of their essays. Most of these learners were from rural/township schools. These groups had at least 10 years of formal instruction in English. The purpose of the essay was to identify the kinds of strategies that were critical in coherent English second language academic writing for black learners in South Africa. These essays were marked using, amongst others, impressionistic procedures sometimes applied in marking an essay. While the procedure relies on the general flow of the text, certain usages were identified to either show whether the learners planned their essays well and also the strategies that they used in writing the essay. The researcher underlined all the errors that affected coherence and cohesion. Bachman and Palmer (1996), recommend that broad specifications be used to define the criteria by which the quality of the essays is evaluated. In this case the following broad specifications were used;

Contextualization of the topic and
Coherence and cohesion

FINDINGS

The Not-so Competent Learners Contextualization of the topic

Findings showed that the not-so-competent learners had problems with contextualization coherence as well as cohesion.

One of the major problems that the researcher noticed in the essays was the learners’ contextualization of the topic. Since language and context are interrelated, it is not possible to

use language correctly if you do not take into account the context of use. Without contextual information it is not possible to determine which meaning is being made (Eggins, 2004:8). The problem of contextualization can be attributed to the learners' failure to include background knowledge and linguistic structures needed in academic domains, or more likely, their lack of such knowledge and the linguistic structures to express it (Extener, 1996: 1-4).

In essay number no. 10 there was nothing about education and South Africa, linking it to apartheid and its legacy. Instead of discussing the education system in South Africa, the student discussed education as a course. This shows that this student did not contextualize the topic due to the lack of background knowledge of linguistic structures needed in academic domains. As a result, the student could not distinguish education as a system and a course.

This problem was also observed in essay no. 3 where the student discussed colonization of South Africa by Britain, freedom, and the fact that South Africa had a black president. These facts are relevant only if they could be linked to education and not discussed in isolation. The student has also failed to synthesize the facts so as to address the topic coherently.

As learners were supposed to write on 'Challenges Facing Education in South Africa', in some essays there was no mention of education in South Africa. Their paragraphs and sentences were not linked.

Students' difficulties in accessing meaning results from their low level of linguistic knowledge as well as from their lack of socio-cultural knowledge required for interpreting and writing texts (Leibowitz, 2004). This is caused in part by the fact that they do not read academic texts.

On the other hand, competent learners were on the whole able to contextualize the topic. Their paragraphs and sentences were linked. Overt markers such as, 'the first' and 'the most' were used to link ideas. Paragraphs were well organized. This kind of writing style showed that these learners used the strategies that were required in academic writing, as they were able to produce coherent texts that were coherent.

Coherence in texts of the not-so competent Learners

Lack of coherence is the other major difficulty the researcher found in all ten essays of the not-so-competent learners analysed.

The pattern that has emerged in all these essays is that there is no sentence and paragraph unity. Learners tend to discuss a lot of points in one paragraph. Their sentences are disjointed, and there is no common thread running across the paragraphs. What is discussed in the previous paragraph, does not relate to what is discussed in the following paragraph. So far these essays lack registerial coherence. As mentioned before, a text has registerial coherence when it hangs together (Eggins, 2004:29), when we can specify for the entire collection of clauses the domain on which the text is focusing (Ross and Murray, 1975:82). These essays also lack registerial coherence since we cannot identify a unified purpose of some of the texts (Eggins, 2004:29).

In order to achieve paragraph unity, learners must ensure that a paragraph has a single generalization that serves as the focus, that is, a topic sentence. However, most learners failed to achieve paragraph unity as a number of unrelated issues were discussed in one paragraph. Specific illustrations are given below

This lack of coherence in learners' essays is a reflection of their problems with academic writing and lack of internal organization (Eggins, 2004:29).

Colloquialism and direct translation from mother tongue

The not-so-competent learners relied on the use of colloquialism and direct translation from mother tongue. Unfortunately, that strategy did not work for them given the register and generic constraints. Colloquialism is language commonly used in informal speech and writing (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1997:63). Gough and Bock (2001) have identified black learners' over-reliance on primary discourse writing strategies as contributing to poor academic writing skills. As opposed to secondary discourse strategies, primary discourse is oral based.

In the following examples, learners addressed the reader directly, as in oral speech. The spoken text contained everyday sorts of words, including slang and dialects and often sentences that were written in the spoken language which did not follow grammatical conventions (Eggins, 2004:93).

In the apartheid era **you'll find only teacher's** in your area not a black lawyer's or doctor's which owns his/her surgery. So clearly changes facing education in this country has improved

In the above sentences the learner is addressing the person directly as in spoken language, which is clearly the wrong mode for the topic and task given.

Sometimes learners translated directly from the mother tongue to the second language. Direct translation according to Lindholm and Padilla (1978:37) is using the equivalent words in the appropriate language. As a strategy this is not a problem in itself, but could affect coherence in the text, as the clause and transitivity structures of African language are not the same as that of English language (Banda, 2003). The meaning and logical relations in the following sentences have been impaired as a result:

1. The department of education often asked the government to **add** the schools.
(Xhosa version - Isebe Lezemfundo soloko licela urhulumente ukuba ongeze izikolo)

In Xhosa 'add' means both 'counting' and 'building'.

Furthermore, learners used informal language or incorrect expressions, which sometimes lead to incoherent sentences. Consider the following sentences from learners' essays:

In South Africa there was the cegregation which was made by Britain oppressing **South African dwellers** or citizen. But because of education South Africa realized that Britain is dominating the rights of the South African citizen. The example of domination that I am talk about there was a say which was saying **the place of the womens is in kitchen** .

Cohesion

The other major weakness with the essays is with cohesion. According to Yule (1999), cohesion refers to the ties and connections which exist within texts. On the other hand, cohesion, according to Halliday and Hassan (1976), refers to the way we relate or tie together bits of

discourse. These ties and connections relate to grammatical devices which have affected cohesion in students' essays. These grammatical devices are; referencing, conjunctions, exemplification, verb forms, spelling, and prepositions. It occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other, in the sense that it cannot be affectively decoded except by recourse to it. When it happens, a relation of cohesion is set up and the two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into a text (see Halliday and Hassan, 1976).

This paper reveals that students who are not-so-competent in academic writing showed serious problems with referencing, compared to other grammatical devices. They used the reference 'the' not referring to what had been mentioned before, nor to what was still going to be mentioned. The same reference was included in sentences where it was not supposed to be used. Sometimes these references were omitted.

Another major weakness of students is the incorrect use of conjunctions. Conjunctions, as defined by Halliday and Hassan (1976), Scollon and Scollon (1995) and Richard, Platt and Platt (1997) are lexical items which are used to join two clauses and which show the relationship between those two clauses. Martin and Rose (2003) state that, conjunctions look at inter-connections between processes of adding, comparing, sequencing or explaining. They help to create semantic unity and are also cohesive devices. These are causal, adversative, additive and temporal conjunctions. Incorrect use of these conjunctions affects cohesion in a text.

The findings showed that verb forms were also another problematic grammatical category, that affected coherence and cohesion in students' texts. Students used different tenses within a sentence. They also confused verbs that were in the gerund with the progressive tense. Sometimes they did not know how a perfect tense was formed. Furthermore, they used verbs that were in the infinitive with a past tense marker 'ed'. Modal auxiliaries, which are used with other verbs to show obligation and uncertainty (Martin & Rose, 2003), were also incorrectly used. These auxiliary verbs are supposed to be followed by a verb in the infinitive but students used them with verbs that were in the past tense.

Essays of students who are competent in academic writing did not display major problems of contextualization, coherence, and cohesion, as had been the case with essays of students who are not competent in academic writing. The competent students also proved that they are competent in academic writing by using overt markers of sequence such as, 'the first' and 'most,' telling the

reader that a new stage is beginning, highlighting the connection between ideas and also comparing things

Competent Learners

Essays of learners who are competent in academic writing did not display major problems of contextualization, coherence and cohesion as had been the case with essays of learners who are not competent in academic writing. Context according to Celce-Marcia and Olshtain (2000:11), are factors and written elements that are non-linguistic but which affect spoken or written communicative interaction. All language use has a context whose textual features enable the discourse to cohere not only with itself, but also with its context of situation in which the text functions (Halliday and Hassan, 1989).

These learners had contextualized the topic and were able to address the question which was:

Challenges facing education in South Africa.

A few essays were analysed to demonstrate how the competent learners were able to contextualize the topic, where the not-so-competent failed.

Learners started with the introduction and then moved to different challenges of education and then concluded by what the country needed to do to face these challenges.

Some of them discussed the education system in the introduction, then the financial problems experienced by students, lack of resources and different subjects. As a conclusion he/she discussed what the government was doing to face these challenges. The two learners mentioned above have contextualized the topic.

Furthermore, in their essays, sentences and paragraphs are linked.

Linking devices such as, 'since', which is used to realize the cause and 'indeed', expressing similarity had been used (Martin and Rose, 2003:117). These conjunctions made it clear to the reader that we were focusing on two similar things. These conjunctions had indeed been used to

make their essays coherent. Also demonstratives such as ‘there’, ‘these’, etcetera’ had been used correctly

These learners also proved that they were competent in academic writing, by using overt markers of sequence such as, ‘the first’ and ‘most,’ telling the reader that a new stage was beginning, highlighting the connection between ideas and also comparing things, (Martin 2003:156). This system according to Kies (2004), has many advantages as it can link ideas that are otherwise completely unconnected. On the other hand, these markers were absent in the essays of not-so-competent learners.

These learners had mastered the stylistic skill of writing which, according to Heaton (1975:138), is the ability to manipulate sentences and use language effectively. Stylistic skill is related to cohesion. This skill ties together bits of discourse and expresses the continuity that exists between one part of the text and another (Halliday and Hassan, 1976:2-4). This involves the use of reference, linkage and expansion devices for coordination and subordination.

Furthermore, most of them knew how to construct sentences and the devices that were used to construct sentences. They could differentiate between a verb and a noun. These learners also knew about concord which is the subject verb relationship (Richards, Platt and Platt 1997: 75). These learners have academic writing skills that are needed at university level. In any piece of writing, being able to organize ideas and express them in your own words is a skill that was displayed by the students (Heaton, 1975:134). This skill is essential for real life communication and also for tertiary education.

In addition, these learners, unlike the not-so-competent group, demonstrated they had the background knowledge and linguistic structures needed in academic domains (Extener, 1996:1-4). Most of them used the correct register, which is the role language plays in interaction (Eggins, 2004:90). The competent learners were able to use the various kinds of register (including slang, jargon, archaic words), standard English and language used by educated writers of English. Use of correct register in writing, implies an awareness not only of a writing goal, but also of a particular audience (Heaton, 1975:139).

It was not surprising that there was coherence and cohesion in their essays. Coherence, as mentioned before, is the text relationship to its extra-textual context (Eggins, 2004:24). In these learners’ essays the paragraphs and sentences were linked and were not disjointed, as was the

case with the essays of the not-so-competent group. One main idea was discussed in each paragraph and ideas flowed into each other and there was a logical development of ideas and argument (Owino, 2002).

Although these essays could be categorised as fairly good, there were very few incorrectly spelt words; for example, ‘governance’ instead of ‘government’. Kembo-sure (2004), says we need not be worried about these deviations, as they should disappear as the learner progresses along the acquisition scale. He goes on to say these mistakes are unstable unless they are allowed to fossilize. Although there were spelling errors in their essays, these did not impair cohesion or coherence. It was also evident that these learners had planned their essays, starting with brainstorming, up to editing since they knew the stages followed in academic writing.

Although most of these learners had acquired academic writing skills, some of them had problems with mechanical skills, which, is the ability to use punctuation marks. Some learners used capital letters randomly.

The findings showed that competent learners did not have major problems with contextualization, coherence and cohesion. Their essays were not disjointed and had logic. There was a vast difference between the not-so-competent learners and the competent ones. Not-so-competent learners were from rural schools and competent ones were from urban schools. Poor infrastructure, lack of resources, untrained and poorly trained teachers and poor quality of education in rural schools affected learners’ writing skills (Banda, 2004).

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve the academic performance of students at ECT, it is important to improve students’ academic writing skills. Thus, academic writing requires conscious effort and practice in composing, developing and analyzing ideas. Also, the writing process incorporates pre-writing activities such as brainstorming, drafting, revising and editing, multiple drafts and peer group editing. Furthermore, students writing in an L2 have to acquire proficiency in the use of the language as well as writing strategies, techniques and skills. Enriching the learning environment by providing well-equipped libraries in each school can help to improve proficiency of students

According to Swales (1990), writing should not be viewed as an individual-oriented, inner-directed cognitive process, but as an acquired response to the discourse. In this regard, effective instruction should afford black students the opportunity to participate in transactions with their own texts and the texts of others. One way of doing this is through group work, in which academic writing tasks are done in mixed groups comprising both competent and not-so-competent students.

Black students need to be encouraged to read academic texts to help them improve their writing skills. In order to facilitate the writing process, students can develop the writing strategies. The strategies include the metacognitive, such as planning the organization of written discourse; cognitive, which is using known linguistic information to facilitate a new learning task and using new vocabulary; and social strategies, that is, intertextual knowledge (Fairclough, 2004), which involves peer revision (O'malley and Chamont, 1990). Interaction and input also play important roles in the writing process. Black students need to receive adequate L2 input and feedback from teachers in order to form a new hypothesis about syntactic and rhetorical forms in the target language, hence, students need to be apprenticed to academic writing and be taught grammar. Students should also be encouraged to analyze and evaluate feedback themselves in order for it to be effective.

Students may also be able to write well if they are exposed to a variety of genres of writing including flyers, magazines, articles and books, amongst others.

One other major problem that affects the academic writing of students is unavailability of resources, including human resources, funding, school facilities, materials and books. According to Banda (2004) most black Africans do not have a culture of reading and writing required in academic discourse.

Most reading and writing in South Africa is in English, which to most South Africans is an L2. Because of this, reading and writing to L2 speakers is always a burden. If material in an African language is available, black students are more likely to read that (Banda, 2004).

CONCLUSION

The findings show that competent students did not have major problems with contextualization, coherence and cohesion. Their essays were not disjointed and have logic. There is a vast

difference between the not-so-competent students and the competent ones. Not-so-competent students are from rural schools and competent ones are from urban schools. Poor infrastructure, lack of resources, untrained and poorly trained teachers and poor quality of education in rural schools affected students' writing skills (Banda, 2004).

To address the problem of the falling standards of academic writing amongst black learners in South Africa, a number of issues need to be tackled immediately, that is, training of teachers to be able to teach academic writing, changing the curriculum to address academic writing needs of learners, ensuring that there are resources in rural schools, and introducing an academic writing model.

But there is no doubt that government will need to play a much greater role than it is currently doing, providing funding, training, and materials. In general the government needs to provide a conducive environment both in the schools and communities, for effective learning.

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